**THE MESSAGE OF THE EMPTY TOMB**

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My Brothers and Sisters,

I take this solemn occasion to wish each of you a blessed and holy Easter!

As we hear in the Easter Gospel from St John (cf. Jn 20:1-9), three friends and followers of Jesus had different experiences of the event of the empty tomb: Mary of Magdala, Peter, and the famous Johannine ‘other disciple.’

Mary arrives ‘while it is still dark,’ which is one of the central theological themes present in John’s Gospel: the struggle between light (righteousness) and darkness (all that is not of God). There is little doubt that she continues to grieve the loss of her Teacher and friend. This is most probably the reason she has returned to the tomb: to mourn Jesus’ death, and to seek answers to the questions haunting her mind and heart. What she sees, however, provokes a deeper reaction, one of fear, the fear that those with evil intentions have stolen the body of Jesus. It is this, perhaps, that drives her to rush back to the company of the disciples and inform them about what she witnessed.

The ‘other disciple’, “the one whom Jesus loved,” is the second person to arrive at the tomb, rushing ahead of Peter. Perhaps, ,because he (or she) was younger, he waits outside the tomb, respectfully awaiting the arrival of the senior partner. Only after Peter’s arrival and entry into the tomb did this ‘other disciple’ dare to enter the hallowed space. When this disciple finally enters the tomb, something occurs in his life. There is a recognition that God is doing something great in and through Jesus – “he saw, and he believed” – but it was not yet clear just what these events meant, and what difference they would make in his life.

Many biblical scholars suggest that this ‘other disciple’ represents each of us who are followers of the risen Lord Jesus. Like this ‘other disciple’, perhaps, we also find ourselves at different moments in our lives rushing in search of answers to lifelong questions, ones that have become even more apparent in these times of the Covid-19 pandemic. Like the ‘other disciple’, we may have come to perceive in the emptiness, fear, and isolation provoked by the pandemic, or something different in our lives, our world, something that is calling for a deeper conversion, a greater truth, a more profound justice, and peace, in order that we might truly ‘see and believe.’ What does this seeing and believing consist of? Perhaps, it is the conviction that God is here, hope is near, the love of God in Jesus, a love that extends to all people and to all creation, and is stronger than the threat of the pandemic, the threat of illness and death!

The third witness to these events is Peter, the one who denied knowing Jesus during his trial, condemnation, and crucifixion. Perhaps, his silence is the result of his feelings of guilt, shame, and total inadequacy. These feelings oftentimes provoke silence. He was but one of the many disciples and friends who had abandoned Jesus in his darkest hour. There is no confession of faith by Peter, as was the case of the ‘other disciple.’ Rather, he gathers information and then returns to the “locked room” where he and the other disciples and friends of Jesus took refuge. It is likely that they discussed together what they had seen and heard. However, the emptiness of the tomb, its message, had not yet penetrated the thick, protective shields that Peter, Jesus’ disciples, and followers, and that we often construct to protect us from that which we perceive as a danger, a threat, that which provokes fear, confusion, anger, and even despair.

My dear Brothers, it would have been more consoling for me to have spoken about the second part of Chapter 20 of the Gospel of St. John, which, according to many scripture scholars, was added at a later moment almost as if to redeem the impenetrable events of the suffering and death of Jesus by demonstrating to the disciples the living presence of the resurrected body of Jesus.

However, I believe this first ‘encounter’ with the empty tomb provides us with an important instrument for reflecting on our lived experience of the Covid-19 pandemic. Darkness has covered the earth, much like that in the primordial times prior to God bringing order out of chaos (Gen. 1:2). Together with all of humanity, we have experienced the threats of chaos and emptiness provoked by the pandemic. We have found ourselves isolated, devoid of physical contact. We have had to put on ‘shields’ to protect us from the unknown but ever-present lurking danger of an unseen organism capable of doing great harm to us – physically, mentally, spiritually, socially, economically, and in many other ways. As we prepare to be vaccinated in order to protect ourselves, we also recognize that there is still too much unknown about the virus to allow us to let down our guards. The dark night is not yet over.

The message of Easter is one that brings hope and inspires courage to all who profess faith in the beloved Son of God, Jesus. The empty tomb does not provide us with answers. Rather, it creates a space in which we might ask tough questions. It provides a place where we might come face to face with all that causes us to fear, all that urges us to choose isolation from God, from one another, and even from ourselves, in place of choosing paths towards authentic fraternity with God and with one another. In the end, the promise of the resurrection provides us with hope. However, this hope is not only the result of something that comes from outside of us, from belief in the power of God’s grace and love. It is, in the end, the result of a decision we make within our minds and hearts, to welcome and embrace the One who has embraced death in order that He may lead all of us toward an authentic experience of what it means to be alive. The resurrection of Jesus presents us with a radical choice — to live daily in the power of God’s love that is stronger than the cruel, enslaving effects of injustice, racism, hatred, violence, and a spiritual wasteland, or to live in the indifference, fear, and hopelessness offered by all that opposes righteousness, holiness, goodness, and truth.

May the love and peace that Jesus offers to all who place their trust in Him fill us with joy and strengthen us in our resolve to embrace the way of the cross, the way of the Gospel, to embrace even the empty tomb. Like Mary Magdala, the ‘other disciple,’ and Peter, may we come to experience what it truly means to be alive in Christ Jesus.

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